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[link to Reader's Digest article](#) [1]

[mental health](#) [2] [heart](#) [3] [brain](#) [4] [wonder](#) [5]



Whether intentionally taking a woodland walk, incidentally experiencing nature as you go about your day, it's becoming clear that nature nurtures your body, mind and soul. In 2003, researchers at the University of Essex coined the term "Green Exercise", recognising the remarkable impact of nature-based activities on health and wellbeing.

### Observations

"In an analysis of the entire population of England, it was found that the rates of cardiovascular mortality were lower in areas with higher levels of greenness...and the odds of hospitalisation for heart disease and stroke are lower among adults who live in neighbourhoods with highly variable greenness," writes [one team](#) [6] of researchers in the *Journal of the American Heart Association*.

Improved mental health and pregnancy outcomes and reduced obesity and risk of diabetes are other benefits of residential greenness described in the World Health Organization's "[Urban green spaces and health](#) [7]" 91-page report.

For those confined to a bed, a window can do wonders for your wellbeing: [a study in 1984](#) [8] revealed that hospital stays for some surgical patients were shorter, and fewer potent painkillers were prescribed, when the window view was onto a natural scene rather than a brick wall.

### Explanations

"If exercise were a pill, it would be one of the most cost-effective drugs ever invented," says Dr Nick Cavill, a health promotion consultant. Aside from its ability to perhaps halve your risk of major illnesses such as heart disease and cancer, exercise also extends to benefits to the mind, improving mental health and wellbeing.

Safe, accessible green spaces, offering clean air and reduced noise pollution, make exercise more attractive, and so more likely. It's estimated that every year in western Europe, a staggering 61,000 years of healthy life are lost to disability or death through heart attacks or angina associated with [traffic noise](#) [9]: running for the hills reaps

rewards in more ways than one.

“Simply being” quiet and calm among the trees can also boost health and wellbeing, in a practice known as [forest bathing](#) [10]. Taking time out from the effortful, directed attention of everyday life, and being involuntarily fascinated by nature is a balm for the brain, relieving [stress](#) [11], a known risk factor for everything from raised blood pressure to addiction. Let’s return to the lost art of being still.

Whether picnicking or park running, being *with people* brings its own set of benefits. Studies show that [loneliness](#) [12] is as harmful to health as obesity, smoking and high blood pressure: friends enrich your life and enhance your health, through support, stress relief, and sharing of healthy habits.

### Deprivation

The health benefits derived from green space seem strongest for those on [lowest incomes](#) [13], including minority ethnic groups.

Provision of green space is, for many, a luxury: making it a priority in deprived areas can partly offset other health inequalities associated with poverty, though optimised levels of nature are obviously not a silver bullet. [Social determinants of health](#) [14], including basic amenities and the environment, have a major impact on people’s health, well-being, and quality of life.

And quality matters as much as quantity when it comes to green spaces: unsafe, unkempt or inaccessible places are unwelcoming and likely to be unused. Several [projects](#) [15] are underway to transform underused land in deprived urban areas into green havens for the community, with the expressed aim of promoting wellbeing.

### Green prescription

Often working in GP surgeries, “social prescribers” recommend and refer people to nature-based interventions and activities, such as local walking for health schemes, community gardening and food-growing projects.

Working out the “dosage” of nature needed, [one group of researchers](#) [16] suggest that up to seven per cent of depression and nine per cent of high blood pressure cases could be prevented if all city residents were to visit green spaces at least once a week for 30 minutes or more.

At an international level, the United Nations prescribe, or at least aim for, “universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities” by 2030.

### Innovation

Links between green space and health have long been recognised, inspiring the urban parks movement, and the creation of more than 300 country convalescent homes in [Victorian Britain](#) [17].

More recent additions include outdoor living walls, “living roof bus shelters” and city tree planting projects. Hospital gardens also support healing, counterbalancing stress and giving space.

For some, the benefits of nature come more easily [in a bottle](#) [18], with scents of blooming roses, honeysuckle and freshly cut grass, accompanied by a CD of garden sounds, offering a virtual journey to nature’s garden, especially for people with dementia.

### Inspiration

Intentionally seeking *inspiration* in nature can be very good for you. Let yourself be stunned by the sunset, silenced by the snowflake and wowed by the waterfall.

Deliberately shifting your focus outward instead of inward, allowing yourself to feel smaller and in awe of something bigger and not immediately understandable, as you take “[awe walks](#) [19]” in nature, can promote positive emotional [wellbeing](#) [20]—as evidenced by bigger smiles, in a study funded by the Global Brain Health Institute.

Monty Don was right when he said, "We don't look after the garden; the garden looks after us." Seek out nature's secrets and savour a suite of health benefits.



**Source URL:** <https://www.helencowan.co.uk/why-nature-so-healing>

### Links

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